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Bobby Kennedy Wrong Bobby Byrd Right!

In the news yesterday were two items, seemingly unrelated, that are related and do add up to a matter of some importance. One was the request of the attorney general, Robert F. Kennedy, for broader authority to eavesdrop on telephone conversations. The other was the Senate's confirmation of John A. McCone as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

(In case Sen. Robert Byrd cares, we approve of his vote against confirmation of McCone. We wouldn't make much point of this agreement if it happened more often.)

Freedom and security are at issue in both of these matters. They are concepts that can't coexist without numerous qualifications. However, like the wedding of fire and water (as steam), there can be a lot of power in the combination, if properly handled.

Wiretapping is a very dangerous thing. In the wrong hands it can lead to rather terrible abuses, including blackmail. Of course when we observe that nice, earnest-looking youth who is attorney general, we automatically think of virtue and righteous indignation in pursuit of evil.

This thought may be entirely accurate. Just for the sake of argument, let us assume that our present attorney general is perfectly virtuous, would never abuse his authority for any kind of selfish advantage, and is not politically ambitious. In this case, for the moment, there would be no harm in giving Perfect Virtue a very powerful weapon, the right to listen in on private conversations. He would use it only to prevent injustice and to punish violators of the law. Who in the world can object to that?

(We will ignore the objections of the Bad Men, who only get what's coming to them.)

THE OBJECTION to this is that the present attorney general could change, as men sometimes do in high office, and further, he will someday be succeeded by another man. It is possible that a successor may be a lesser man who is unable to resist the terrible temptations to misuse the terrible weapon of being able to listen to others' private conversations with impunity.

We seem to be putting more and more people in positions of awesome power without the "checks" that are supposed to give us protection. There's J. Edgar Hoover, against whom to whisper is virtually subversion. The Central Intelligence Agency is another such branch. There is no check against the spending of money, the direction of the "cloak and dagger" moves. No elected official is at the head of the organization. It may conceivably be used against the best interests of the American people.

When the CIA was headed by Allen Dulles some people thought he could be given this awesome power of blank check spending, unrestricted policy-making, and so on and so on. It was necessary to fight the Cold War and all that stuff. He was a trustworthy man. He could make the terrible judgments that might make or break this or another nation some thought.

Some doubt has been cast about his judgment in at least one matter which has become publicly known — the Cuban invasion fiasco. How many more are there that he flubbed, that we have no record of?

TO TOP THAT we now have a very questionable character being put into the very "sensitive" position that Dulles held. The only thing he really seems to have to recommend him is an ability to insinuate himself into a favored position to make money — at government expense.

The more people of "unquestioned merit" that we put into positions where they are in fact unquestioned, the better the system of "checks and balances" that a bunch of smart fellows set up in 1776 seems!